

Sundance  
Film Festival  
2024

## AGENT OF HAPPINESS

Press Notes



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**Directed by:** Arun Bhattacharai & Dorottya Zurbó

**Produced by:** Noémi Veronika Szakonyi, Máté Artur Vincze, Arun Bhattacharai

**Runtime:** 94 minutes

**Sundance Festival Screenings:** Friday, January 19th at 12:15pm - The Egyptian Theatre - World Premiere

Saturday, January 20th at 11:00am - Redstone 1 - 1st Public

Saturday, January 20th at 4:00pm - Holiday 3, PC - 1st P&I

Saturday, January 20th at 4:30am - Gateway 6 - 2nd Public

Thursday, January 25th at 1:15pm - PC Library - 3rd Public

Friday, January 26th at 6:45pm - Broadway 6 - 4th Public

**Publicity Contact:** DDA | [AgentOfHappiness@ddapr.com](mailto:AgentOfHappiness@ddapr.com)

**Sales:** Cinephil (World) | [shoshi@cinephil.com](mailto:shoshi@cinephil.com)

## **Synopsis**

How can you measure happiness? The country of Bhutan invented Gross National Happiness to do just that, and Amber is one of the agents who travels door to door to meet people and measure how happy they really are. He is still living with his elderly mother at the age of 40, but is nevertheless a hopeless romantic who dreams of finding love: a happiness agent who is in search of his own happiness. We embark with Amber on a cross-country road trip meeting citizens from all walks of life, reminding us of the fragility and beauty of our own happiness. No matter where we live.

## **Directors' Statement**

Arun - Dorottya (from Hungary) and I (from Bhutan) have been co-directing for the last 11 years, right from the time we met at the Docnomads Joint Masters Program in Europe, where we studied together. We also co-directed our first feature-length documentary *The Next Guardian*, an intimate family story set in Bhutan, which premiered at the 2017 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. The seeds of this new film, *Agent of Happiness*, emerged during our experiences in the last decade living together and creating films in Bhutan. The multicultural dialogue between us has not only strengthened our interest in documentary, but encouraged us to understand where we come from and how we can benefit from each other's different perspectives in artistic works.

Bhutan was closed from the outside world until it became a constitutional monarchy in 2008. It was also the last country in the world to receive television in 1998. Due to its isolation, Bhutan is often exoticized by western media as the last Shangri-La, a hidden Buddhist kingdom. In recent years, Bhutan started being known to the outside world because of its development philosophy and abstract science of "Gross National Happiness"(GNH) that was created by the king in the 90s. Inside Bhutan, the happiness of its citizens gets measured by happiness surveyors that go around the country and from the results 5-year developmental plans are made. Outside Bhutan, this development philosophy has become Bhutan's top global brand.

Dorottya - As a Hungarian coming from one of the most pessimistic countries in the world, I was impressed by the idea that a nation could build its national identity based on happiness. As an eastern European with a burdened past, I have an instinctive suspicion towards government-initiated communication and propaganda. But in Bhutan, nothing works the way we imagine or predict. I was curious to know how it affects people when happiness is imposed on them as an official requirement – can we really become happier if it is injected into our collective consciousness, knowing the fact that our country is leading in happiness index statistics? Arun and I were inspired by these numbers, how to measure feelings and life experiences with formulas, and wanted to translate this act of measurement into cinematic experiences that look beyond the graphs and show the mind and soul of Bhutanese people. To connect with them, not with numbers but with the fragility of their own happiness, and to learn how to find it either in the deepest sorrow, not in striving more, but letting things go. It's one thing that I myself need to learn in my life too.

Arun - As a Bhutanese growing up in the times when GNH was created, I couldn't escape it. We were taught GNH in schools, watched it on TV and even celebrated it on National Happiness Day – but I always felt conflicted about the ideals of GNH since I come from the ethnic Nepali community living in Bhutan. GNH promotes human well-being over material wealth, but the rights of the minority Nepali population were often not considered while talking about it. This was the trigger for us to dig deeper and get a local insight into the subject and go beyond the GNH survey statistics through personal stories to show the audience a more complex vision.

Dorotyya and Arun: This drove us to the Happiness Center where we met our main protagonist, Amber Gurung, who works as a happiness agent going door to door to measure the happiness index of the citizens. We immediately connected with him because of his openness, as well as his self-deprecating humor. As we got to know him better we realized that deep inside he is unhappy because he is in search of love. He goes around the country measuring peoples' happiness levels but he himself is very lonely. We felt there is a contrasting dynamic in this situation, which can move along the film's emotional storyline: a happiness agent who is in search of his own happiness. His quest for love is made even more difficult because he doesn't have a Bhutanese citizenship despite being born in Bhutan. Nevertheless, Amber is the first main protagonist in a Bhutanese film who comes from the ethnic Nepali community of Bhutan.

Amber's heartwarming character and ability to see joy and ease in the most hopeless situations can create empathy towards him and also towards people who struggle with the same social problem in Bhutan. Through Amber we meet people like Yangka, a teenage girl living in an isolated village trying to be the head of the family and raising her younger sister with love, Dechen, a transgender performer who finds strength and acceptance in her mother, Tshering, who draws hope from his Buddhist faith while grieving his wife's death, and Tashi, who finds happiness in an unexpected sisterhood while escaping her patriarch husband. Their acceptance, love and strength gives us insight into our own search for happiness. The film lets the audience think of their own lives and struggles from a different perspective, and encourages Bhutanese people to start discussions about the themes that appear.

As documentary filmmakers, we search for authentic human stories. We feel it's important to show the deep human dramas behind everyday events, the dynamics of relationships, the hidden, invisible faces of desires, dreams and fears. In our films, we often deal with the meeting of cultures, identities, values and patterns. We are attracted to these stories, to intimate life situations where, by bridging the cultural difference, we can show the familiar in the other, the universal values, the feelings that connect us, wherever we grow up in the world. *Agent of Happiness* is a bittersweet tale that takes place in an environment which is still enigmatic and untouched, disguised from the eyes of a wider world. We believe that it is also important to produce stories with uplifting, heart-warming potential in difficult times, that this is one of our responsibilities as artists.

## Directors' Biographies

**Arun Bhattarai** (director, cinematographer, co-producer, Bhutan) premiered his first feature-length documentary 'The Next Guardian' (co-directed by Dorottya Zurbó) - an intimate family story set in Bhutan - at IDFA in 2017. The film has been screened at more than 40 international festivals (True/False, Ambulante, SFFILM, MoMA DocFortnight etc.). Before becoming an independent filmmaker, he worked as a TV director at the Bhutan Broadcasting Service for 5 years. He graduated from the first edition of DocNomads Joint Master in documentary directing in 2014. His recent short documentary 'Mountain Man', about Bhutan's only glaciologist won the best pitch prize at If/Then Global Short-Pitch at IDFA 2019 and is supported by the IDA-XRM Media incubator program. The film has been screened at IDFA, DOC NYC, Chicago IFF ect. His new film 'Agent of Happiness' is supported by the Sundance Film Institute, Catapult Film Fund and DMZ Docs Fund among others. The project was developed at the Points North Fellowship 2022, True False Rough Cut Retreat 2023 and Doc.incubator 2023. He established his own production company - Sound Pictures - dedicated to creative documentaries in 2015. He is one of the few independent documentary filmmakers in Bhutan.

**Dorottya Zurbó** (co-director, Hungary) premiered her first feature-length documentary 'The Next Guardian' (co-directed by Arun Bhattarai), - an intimate family story set in Bhutan - at IDFA in 2017. Since then, it has been screened at more than 40 international festivals (True/False, San Francisco IDFF, MoMA DocFortnight etc.). Parallely, she worked on her first directorial debut 'Easy Lessons', a feature-length documentary about a young Somalian refugee girl who tries to adapt to Hungary, premiered at the Locarno Film Festival Critics Week section in 2018. The film participated in more than 40 international festivals (HotDocs, Camden IDFF, Sarajevo IFF etc.) receiving awards such as the Hungarian Critics Award for Best Documentary in 2019. Her new film 'Agent of Happiness' is supported by the Sundance Film Institute, Catapult Film Fund and DMZ Docs Fund among others. The project was developed at the Points North Fellowship 2022, True False Rough Cut Retreat 2023 and Doc.incubator 2023. Beside filmmaking she has been teaching at the prestigious DocNomads Joint Master program in Europe.

# Credits

**Directors:** Arun Bhattacharai & Dorottya Zurbó

**Producers:** Noémi Veronika Szakonyi, Máté Artur Vincze, Arun Bhattacharai

**Executive Producers:** Dawn Bonder, Daniel J. Chalfen, Janice Finley, Susan Potter, Marci Wiseman

**Cinematographer:** Arun Bhattacharai

**Editor:** Péter Sass

**Sound Design & Mix:** Rudolf Várhegyi H.S.A.S., Tamás Bohács H.S.A.S.

**Composer:** Ádám Balázs

## **Featuring**

Amber Kumar Gurung

Sarita Chettri

Guna Raj Kuikel

Hemlata Gurung

Yangka Lhamo

Wangmo Lhamo

Dophu Dem

Dechen Selden

Tshering Lham

Tshering

Tashi Tshomo

Karma Lhamo

Kezang Yuden

Karma Wangdi

**Associate Producer:** Suraj Bhattacharai

**Line Producer:** Anna Tóth

**Assistant Camera:** Dorji Dendup

**Location Sound Recordist:** Suraj Bhattacharai, Dorottya Zurbó

**Location Sound Assistant:** Dependra Adhikari

**Colorist:** Máté Ternyik

**Editing Consultant:** Károly Szalai H.S.E.

**Assistant Editor:** Tímea Nemes

**Still Photo:** Nithil Dennis

**NFI Script Doctor:** Márk Bodzsár

## **Production Assistants**

Asia Dér  
Genuka Dhakal  
Dawa Drakpa  
Sára Haragonics  
Kimi Hnamte  
Tibor Kapás  
Chimi Wangchuck

**Music Licensing:** Ildikó Falus

**Production Accountant:** Nikolett Baranyai, Nikolett Kovács-Balga

**Nfi Accountant:** Adrienn Sipos

**Production Legal:** Dr. Róbert Nagy

**Production Insurance**

Matild Kovács  
Tamás Rákos - Showrisk  
Rita Róza  
Bakonyi - Groupama

**Production Travel:** Weco-Travel, Krisztina Cseres

**Editing Facility**

Editinn Studio  
Zoltán Tóth  
Zsombor Virág

**Digital Post Production**

Post Office Films  
Gábor Káplár  
Vanda Gorác

**Post Production Supervisor:** Miklós Herzán

**VFX Studio:** K.G.B. Stúdió

**VFX Supervisor:** Béla Klingl

**VFX Artists**

Zsolt Csajági  
Róbert Odegnál

Erik Vidos

**VFX Production Manager:** Tibor Sólyom

**Main And End Titles:** Kriszta Mwajas

**Trailer:** Doraya Bouandel

**Post Production Sound:** Infaze Studio

**Supervising Sound Editor:** Rudolf Várhegyi H.S.A.S.

**Re-Recording Mixer:** Rudolf Várhegyi H.S.A.S.

**Dialogue Editor:** Tamás Bohács H.S.A.S.

**Sound Effects Editor:** Tamás Bohács H.S.A.S.

**Foley:** Holy Foley Studios

**Foley Artist:** Jaka Skočir

**Foley Mixer:** Žiga Rangus

**Foley Editor:** Tom Lemajič

**Project Manager:** Polona Kumelj

**Dialogue List:** Erika Köcsky, Katalin Harrer

**Continuity And Spotting:** Erika Köcsky, Katalin Harrer

**English Translation:** Krisztina Sarkady-Hart, Adrian Hart

### **Translators**

Diksha Adhikari

Dipendra Adhikari

Cheknath Bhattarai

Karma Dendup

Khagi Maya Dhakal

Sangay Laythro

Thukten Nyenda

Namgay Lhamo Sherpa

Gaki Nyima Tamang

Karma Kinley Wangmo

**World Sales:** Cinephil

**Hungarian Distribution:** Mozinet

**Music**



JIMMY JIMMY

Artist: Parvati Khan

Music: Bappi Lahiri

Lyrics: Anjaan

Publisher: Saregama India Ltd.

AYE MERE HUMSAFAR

Artist: Udit Narayan

Music: Anand Milind

Lyrics: Majrooh Sultanpuri

Publisher: T-Series

DRUK ZHUNG DINA GAWA

Artist: Zimpon Wom Tashi

Music: Nidu Studios

Lyrics: Nidu Studios

Publisher: Nidu Studios

TSOMPAPPO

Artist: Tshering Yangdon Pinky

Music: Zhegyal Studio

Lyrics: Lungten Wangchuk Karma

Publisher: Zhegyal Studio

SAMJHANA BIRSANA

Artist: Udit Narayan Jha

Music: Shambhujit Baskota

Lyrics: Shambhujit Baskota

Publisher: Music Nepal

EUTA SAPANA CHA

Artist: Pushpan Pradhan

Music: Puspan Pradhan

Lyrics: Puspan Pradhan

"Publisher: Creative Hats"

RANG

Artist: Nikhita Thapa & Brijesh Shrestha

Music: Brijesh Shrestha

Lyrics: Nikhita Thapa

"Publisher: Ness Studios"